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AUTHOR Trindell, Roger
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ABSTRACT

The organization and content of an introductory human geography course instituted at Mansfield State University (Pennsylvania) to interest students in a geography major and possible geography career is described. Organized around basic geography "co-traditions," the course begins by examining geography's origin, purpose, and relation to other disciplines; it also stresses the practical value of the discipline and the employment opportunities for prospective majors. Content is studied through case studies chosen on the basis of timeliness and potential student interest. Student activities focus on the self-study assignment, in which students are required to use the local area for the application of concepts and of various geographic approaches studied. The course concludes with a brief discussion of applied geography and geography of the future. (LP)

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ATTRACTING FUTURE GEOGRAPHERS:

THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE

Roger Trindell
Professor and Chairman
Department of Geography and Regional Planning
Mansfield State University
Mansfield, Pennsylvania

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ATTRACTING FUTURE GEOGRAPHERS: THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE

Roger Trindell
Department of Geography and Regional Planning
Mansfield University of Pennsylvania

According to a Chronicle of Higher Education survey of 380,248 students who entered college in the fall of 1981 and 1982, not one identified "geography" as a "probable field of study."[1] This revelation probably surprises very few of us, but it does point up the continuing need by our profession, more so than other more "popular" or "visible" ones, to give serious attention to the matter of attracting students to our ranks if we are to survive and prosper.

Our experience at Mansfield State College (now Mansfield University of Pennsylvania) is undoubtedly typical of many small colleges; few students initially select us as their major department. Yet over the years, despite a fluctuating college enrollment and changing student interest, we have been quite successful in obtaining adequate numbers of majors. Admittedly, at least in part, this has been accomplished by directing our efforts, beginning in 1972, to "applied geography," a development which I detailed in a paper presented at these meetings last year in San Diego.[2] Of equal or greater importance, however, was our concurrent decision to provide an offering of introductory courses intended to attract students to our program at the very start of their college careers. It should be carefully noted, therefore, that of the 380,248 students surveyed above, 4.65% were "undecided" as to their probable field of study."[3] On our campus, this percentage of "undecideds" is even larger and is the principal group from which many of

our majors come after taking one or more of our introductory, general education courses. Thus, the need to design attractive and meaningful introductory courses!

Presently, our Department has five "introductory" level courses which have been approved for offering within the University's "General Education" program. They are "Human Geography," "Physical Geography," "World Regional Geography," "Environmental Land-Use," and "Introduction to Regional Planning." As all students are required to participate in the General Education Program, I'll direct my attention on how one of our courses, "Human Geography," is purposefully designed to attract our share of these students, some of whom eventually become geography majors. But, first, a word about "Introductory" geography.

THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE

As we all too well know, a great deal has been said and written about the nature of the introductory geography course.[4] I don't intend to review those discussions at this time except to note that most appear to focus on course content rather than course organization. This is indeed unfortunate, as it seems to suggest that we believe the content of the course to be more important than its context. Moreover, many of our widely-used introductory texts do little to dispell that image, being themselves largely factual in effect, if not intention.[5] Thus, despite our protestations and talk of the "new geography," students are frequently disinterested in taking a geography course because they believe it will consist largely of a recitation of facts and that

they will need to memorize a lot of meaningless, frequently erroneous, and shortly outdated "geographical" information.

What, then, should be the nature of the "introductory" geography course? In my opinion, this course should not merely, as the word suggests, "introduce" students to our discipline, but interest and involve them in our ideas, approaches, and activities. This is best accomplished, I believe, by organizing the course conceptually. If students are to comprehend and appreciate the seemingly complex nature of modern academic geography, a clearly stated frame-of-reference is absolutely essential. This is what I have attempted to do in the introductory "Human Geography" course.

THE HUMAN GEOGRAPHY COURSE

As is probably true for many of you, I have struggled with the nature and organization of the introductory human geography course for a very long time. Then, about ten years ago, for the reason previously mentioned, I completely gave up on the published, generally topically organized, human geography texts and developed my own detailed syllabus, which I have subsequently modified and updated every year since.[6]

Although my syllabus and course is clearly and overtly organized around my version of geography's "co-traditions,"[7] I begin the class by discussing geography's origin, purpose, and relationship to science and other academic disciplines. A very important part of this "introductory" section also deals with the practical value of geography and,

more specifically, the employment opportunities for prospective geographers. I wish to emphasize that I feel it extremely worthwhile that students taking such a "general education," "introductory" course be made acutely aware of how one can "make a living" as a geographer.[8] This not only gives students a more positive image of our discipline, but may also stir their interest in geography as a potential career.

Each tradition is then examined in sufficient detail, so that its specific purpose, ideas, and viewpoints are (hopefully!) well understood. An integral part of this learning experience is the "self-study" assignment, in which students are required to use the local area for the application of the concepts and approaches of the various traditions. For instance, within the context of the regional tradition, students may be asked to determine Mansfield's trade area; while within the ecological tradition, I may have them analyze how environmental factors appear to have affected or influenced local activities and patterns. For the locational tradition, students may deal with a variety of local problems, such as: the accessibility of public facilities, attracting a new economic enterprise, or the siting of satellite health care centers. All assignments, incidently, are graded and returned.

Although I consider the conceptual organization of the course the most important consideration, course content is not an unimportant matter and should clearly relate to the frame-of-reference and contribute to its more meaningful understanding. I utilize the "case-study"

approach for this purpose; and, within each tradition, I usually present two or three studies which are selected on the basis of their timeliness and potential interest to students. A few examples are: (regional tradition) "Appalachia and the Appalachian Regional Commission," (ecological tradition), "The Sun and Fun Culture of Southern California," (locational tradition) "The American Automotive Industry," One valuable benefit of a personally designed syllabus, quite obviously, is that it allows considerable freedom and flexibility in determining course content.

I conclude the course with a brief discussion of "Applied Geography" and "The Geography of the Future and the Future of Geography." I also summarize the major points-of-view and types of geographical analyses which we have learned during the semester.

CONCLUSION

In a most provocative essay entitled, "The Sixteen-Million-Hour Question,"[9] Marvin Mikesell urges us to renew our dedication to undergraduate education, and writes that "What is needed now is debate about appropriate teaching strategies and sharing of accounts of relative success and failure." How does this course fair? I sincerely believe that it has been largely successful. Students, in evaluation questionnaires, generally respond favorably, and the fact that many of them follow this course with another and that new majors are frequently obtained from this class suggests that we are doing something right. In any event, whether or not you personally find

anything useful in this approach to the human geography course, it is important that we all recognize the significance of the introductory course to the future survival and prosperity of our discipline, and that we give its organization and content our most serious attention[10] as we go about the business of attracting future geographers.

Footnotes

1. Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb. 17, 1982, 11; and Jan. 26, 1983, 11.

2. "Applied Geography at a Small State College," NCGE 1982 Annual Meetings, San Diego, Calif., Oct. 27-30, 1982, 7 pp.

3. Moreover, 9.8% of the students were also "undecided" as to their "probable career occupation." Chronicle, loc. cit.

4. A few examples are: Association of American Geographers, Geography in Undergraduate Liberal Education, Wash., D.C., 1965; Association of American Geographers, New Approaches in Introductory College Geography Courses (Commission on College Geography, Pub. No. 4), Wash., D.C., 1967; and Association of American Geographers, Introductory Geography: Viewpoints and Themes (Commission on College, Pub. No. 5), Wash., D.C., 1967.

   Also worth noting are Robert S. Bacon, "Building a Curriculum in Introductory Human Geography Through Core Concepts," Journal of Geography 78 (1979), 152-156; and Robert A Harper, "Geography in General Education: The Need to Focus on the Geography of the Field," Journal of Geography 81 (1982), 122-139.

5. James O. Wheeler and J.P. Slack, "An Assessment of Recent College Textbooks in Introductory Human and Regional Geography," Journal of Geography 80 (1981), 249-254). "The five contemporary research themes identified in this study were poorly covered in introductory textbooks in human and regional geography." (p. 254)

   At least one exception is the text by Arthur Getis, et. al., Geography (Macmillan, N.Y., 1981). "This book is organized around those four traditions, which are defined in some detail in the Introduction: the earth-science tradition, the culture-environment tradition, the location tradition, and the area-analysis tradition." (p.v.)

6. Human Geography: Concepts and Cases (a text-syllabus for Geog. 102, Human Geography), Fall/Spring 1983-84, 9th ed., 305 pp.

7. W.D. Pattison, "The Four Traditions of Geography," Journal of Geography 63 (1964), 211-216, and J. Lewis Robinson, "A New Look at the Four Traditions of Geography," Journal of Geography 75 (1976), 520-530.

8. In the Chronicle surveys above, for instance, the highest rated "very important reason for going to college" was "able to get a better job" (77.1%); while the next highest rated (68.4%) was "able to make more money," Chronicle, loc. cit.

   I've been discussing employment opportunities for prospective geographers in this class for some time, at least since 1972 when we began our regional planning program, and I'm now pleased to note that at least one recently published text, The Cultural Landscape: An Introduction to Human Geography (J.M. Rubenstein and R.S. Bacon, West Publishing Company, St. Paul, Minn., 1983), gives "up-front" attention to this important concern on the part of many college students ("Careers in Geography," 5-6).

   Another recent text, Geography: A Modern Synthesis (P. Haggett, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1983) relegates a section on "Jobs in Geography" to the final chapter and pages (616-619).

   The AAG, publication, Careers in Geography (S.J. Natoli, 1983, 43pp.) is a useful primer for this topic.

9. The Professional Geographer 32 (1980), 263-268; quote on 267-268.

10. "Decision making in the design of our introductory courses is especially deserving of review." Ibid., 267.